

Sicily

## Home: Where We Live, Hope, and Learn

I'm so vividly aware of the ways I don't fit in at Grant High School. When students struggle to understand why I have to pay for my own car, my own insurance, my own gas, I have that feeling. When they come to school with all new clothes at the beginning of the year and I've exhausted my new items by the first week, I feel it. Or when I hear someone say, "Yikes, I'm not going to the Jeff game. It's kinda sketchy there," it feels like a sharp dig at my neighborhood that I love so much. These streets I grew up playing on are only now "safe," after gentrification reared its ugly head? My community is beautiful and grasping for the last scraps of diversity, both socio-economically and racially. And it has not been easy, especially for those pushed out by rising prices and lower accessibility. Words attacking my reality make this I'm-a-misfit feeling inside grow stronger.

For me, you see, acceptance is not what so much of Grant culture says it is. Acceptance is not caring and engaging when it's cool, but truly spending your life with people different than you. Acceptance and community are what I see and feel when I walk around my not-perfect-but perfect-for-me neighborhood. When I look out my window and see all sorts of kids of all different ages and colors playing together, I don't feel like a misfit anymore.

More often than not, I regret going to Grant High School. It has only amplified my feeling that I don't fit in. That I can't be cool unless I buy expensive clothes that look cheap and demonstrate my passion just delicately enough not to step on any toes. I feel restricted, and not by my budget or lack of this sense of what's cool, but by the culture itself. Last year when we watched a video on Vanport and institutionalized racism in

Portland, so many students were unaware of these topics and the name Vanport stumbled off their tongues like it was an unfamiliar word. How can we expect to reach true justice and acceptance when so many students don't have a baseline knowledge of our own city? Of the people living here? The people who used to live here?

Where does that leave me? As a white girl, I blend in here at Grant. Yet my upbringing feels so different from so many others I go to school with. See, to understand the way I grew up, you need to see what my neighborhood used to look like. You need to see what it still is for me. There was no new, commanding, spaceship of a house with a Tesla parked outside. There was a church, one that every Sunday morning at 8 would broadcast melodious tunes to the world, and even the grass would sway along. That church showed me that magic can live on every corner.

Next door in the faded blue house lived a family of 12, refugees from the Congo. Ms. Zawadi, their matriarch, always was cooking something delicious and humming as she peered out the window, and telling me that I should be learning French instead of Spanish. Occasionally she would borrow bricks from when my dad tore down the chimney and use them to grill fish. The aromas were intoxicating. My family and I went to two of her daughters' weddings and the services were long, loud, and vibrant. My sisters and I were often the only little white girls in the room, an experience that has shaped the way I live. One day Ms. Zawadi came to our house and told us they were moving to SE Portland so she could start her own business. We cried. Not many women could give me a better picture of what strength, bravery, and intelligence look like. She taught me what it looks like to have hope and joy always.

When I was 6, a family who celebrated both Hanukkah and Christmas moved in

next door. Their mom grew up in Chicago and their dad all over Africa. Their house is covered in homemade artwork and their walls painted every color of the rainbow. They build things together in the garage and when they run around with my sisters, their curly hair bounces in the most captivating way. They teach me still how color can invigorate and how traditions are beautiful.

These stories are all a part of my life, my story, my home. Now there are many things my community has experienced that I will never have to, and that's what privilege looks like. What I can do though, is listen, is learn. What I can do is spend time with my neighbors, my community. What I can do is notice the ways that we are different but engage in the ways that we are the same. Because no matter how much of a misfit I feel like sometimes, there is an overflowing basket of ways that we are all the same.